Taylor Huntington

WRTG 1320/ CRN 11237

Professor Deb Moore

October 30, 2012

Advising Appointment: 10/24/12 1:00-1:30

The American Family and its Evolution

Families are always changing, whether on the micro level (children growing older, the birth and death of family members) or on the macro level (the rate of divorce in the country, cohabitation or marriage). The standards for different genders have grown over the years from the working man and the stay-at-home mothers, to women CEO’s and male nurses. These changes in turn affect how society views the relationships that make up a family. These relationships can be between spouses or siblings, as well as from parent to child. These distinct relationships that construct the family unit have come under criticism for not living up to the traditional standards that some people still cling to. No one, let alone an entire family, can please every critic in the world because a family consists of so many components, which shows that even people who are completely committed to each other cannot meet society’s standards and goals. The aspects that make up these units: marriage and what defines a family, single mothers, and divorce, are sublevels of the family that writers and researchers give background and support to their opposing views of the changing American family.

Pauline Irit Erera presents the term “family” as ever changing, and constantly shifting with the rise and fall of the economy and American values. Erera has published many in depth works on different types of families: step-, foster, lesbian, and noncustodial fathers have become her main focus for research of different families. This lets her present a positive assessment of marriage and family. Andrew Cherlin agrees with Erera’s view and adds individualism to the term family by quoting Supreme Court Justice Stephen Field saying, “marriage, as creating the most important relation in life, as having more to do with the morals and civilization of a people than any other institution” (437). The lay man’s version of this quote means that marriage depends on the culture a person resides in and how that society view’s the meaning of a marriage. James Wilson, author of “Cohabitation Instead of Marriage” offers a contrasting opinion on the definition of marriage by saying, “Marriage is a way of restricting the freedom of people so that investing emotionally and financially in the union makes sense” (430). Wilson gives a darker assessment of the union of marriage than both Erera and Cherlin.

Wilson believes that marriage exists only to raise children and keep the traditional family alive and states that “cultures set rules for marriage that were not only designed to protect the child but to achieve a variety of other goals as well” (431). Erera does not agree with Wilson but points out that traditionalists try to keep the family focused around children by only letting married couples adopt (423). Cherlin brings up one of his own previous works to point out that “the companionate marriage of the mid-20th century has morphed in to the individualized marriage of the late 20th century” to present the change he sees in the meaning of marriage (435). While this contradicts Wilson’s belief the quote expresses Erera’s and Cherlin’s assumptions that the definition of marriage is changing due to the shifting American values, and where there is marriage, there is divorce as well.

Cherlin brings forward the origins and past of divorce as well as how it was frowned upon by the Catholic Church, and many Protestant families. Only in desperate cases were spouses allowed to divorce, and these particular cases were termed adultery and desertion (434). Later on in the colonies that became America, some states legalized divorce and many couples moved to these states only to be released from their duties as a married man or woman (435). Cherlin barely gives his own opinion on divorce, but believes it has become more accepted in the American society over time and this results in as many divorces as unions of marriage. Wilson argues that divorce is not as common as Cherlin presents it to be because divorce is “an elaborate and possibly costly legal ritual” (430). This backs up Wilson’s view that divorce is a better solution than having a couple that cohabitates, because if he stopped loving his spouse while simply living with her then he could walk right out the door, versus having to put up with the expenses of a divorce (430). This simply means that the union of marriage is a tighter bond between a couple than the act of living together, therefore a married couple is unlikely to separate. Erera again sides with Cherlin that divorce is a commonplace action in today’s society. She states “in all cultures and era, stable marriage systems have rested upon coercion—overt or veiled—and on inequality” (423). She proposes that divorce has become easier to achieve because of the increase in the jobs available for women and the decreasing dependency they have on the male gender. While Wilson contradicts the other authors, they all agree that divorce has become a quick solution to the problem instead of trying to work out the problem. They blame the rise of divorce on the changing American values in society, and they turn their attention towards the offspring usually left to deal with the aftermath of a divorce.

Andrew Cherlin, Pauline Irit Erera, and even James Wilson agree that children and the single parents that support them are a huge aspect of the changing family in America. Cherlin points out that unlike the growing acceptance of divorce, “there is no long-term social and legal tradition of ambivalence toward single parents who have borne children without marrying” (436). His statement reflects his belief that single parents who have a child out of wedlock are more criticized than parents that are divorced with children. Erera agrees with his statement, for the most part, but adds that single parents will still deal with troubles whether they are divorced or not. She tells how the increasing numbers of mothers who are not committed in a marriage see being a single parent as offering “greater satisfaction and security than a marriage of questionable stability” (420). She also views single parents as the movers and shakers of family diversity, and state that there is no difference in how the children of single parents are raised when compared to children raised by a heterosexual, married couple. She does point out in “What Is a Family?” that single parents are attacked and suffer high poverty rates, but take care of their children as best they can (423). Wilson contradicts the other authors when he states that marriage produces “personal health, longer lives, and better children” (432). Wilson does not view a couple as a family unless they are married. This ties in with his view that single parents are those that bring down the meaning of “family” and that children of single parents are highly affected in a corrupt way throughout their entire lives. Nevertheless, all three authors view children as an integral part of the American family.

The three articles: “What Is a Family”, “Cohabitation Instead of Marriage”, and “The Origins of the Ambivalent Acceptance of Divorce” provide differing opinions and aspects of what changes the American family from past to present society. Their articles bring forth many similar situations coupled with contrasting views. Though they agree on many points, their contradicting statements provide a view of the American family from three different lives. When marriage sometimes leads to divorce and children are either supported by single parents or not, Erera, Wilson, and Cherlin offer their arguments as support for their side of the “family table”. Readers may never know which one is right, but all three writers prove that the American family is and always will be changing.

**Works Cited**

Cherlin, Andrew J. “The Origins of the Ambivalent Acceptance of Divorce.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71.2 (2009): 226-29. Web. Rpt. in *Writing in the Disciplines: A Reader and Rhetoric for Academic Writers*, 7th ed. Ed. Mary Lynch Kennedy and William J. Kennedy. Boston; Pearson 2012. 433-37. Print.

Erera, Pauline Irit. “What Is a Family?” *Family Diversity: Continuity and Change in the Contemporary Family*. Sage Publications, Inc. Books. (2002); 1-15. Rpt. in *Writing in the Disciplines: A Reader and Rhetoric for Academic Writers*, 7th ed. Ed. Mary Lynch Kennedy and William J. Kennedy. Boston; Pearson 2012. 416-28. Print.

Wilson, James Q. “Cohabitation Instead of Marriage.” *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*. New York: Harper Collins. (2002); 38-41. Rpt. in *Writing in the Disciplines: A Reader and Rhetoric for Academic Writers*, 7th ed. Ed. Mary Lynch Kennedy and William J.Kennedy. Boston; Pearson 2012. 429-32. Print.